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ABSTRACT

The study examined whether or not research is being put into practice to select the best and the brightest for the position of principal and attempts to categorize ways in which discrimination occurs by identifying whether hiring agents discriminate against certain kinds of candidates. Specifically, three kinds of bias are examined: (1) gender of the candidate; (2) experience versus knowledge or education of the candidate; and (3) miscellaneous variables in hiring practices. The sample population included all 39 elementary and secondary principals in Washington County, Maine, with 29 (74%) of the principals responding. The perceptions indiciate that superintendents and school boards are not as objective, fair, and equitable as they should be in selecting and hiring principals. There is an apparent disregard for the level of education or knowledge of candidates on the part of hiring agents. Implications for the future are discussed. Appended are seven references and a bar graph of characteristics of the respondents in the sample population. (SI)

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ON HIRING PRINCIPALS:

PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPALS ON SELECTION AND HIRING PRACTICES - Are They Objective, Equitable and Fair?

By

P. Godin and M.P. Mithoefer

April, 1988

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Statement of Purpose

The literature on effective schools is replete with evidence on the importance of the role of the building level principal in achieving excellent schools. In their book entitled, The Effective Principal, Blumberg and Greenfield (1980), capture the essence of a number of research studies in this statement:

> In many ways the school principal is the most important and influential individual in any school. He is the person responsible for all of the activities that occur in and around the school building. It is his leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for learning, the level of professionalism and morale of teachers and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become. He is the main link between the school and the community and the way he performs in that capacity largely determines the attitudes of students and parents about the school. If a school is a vibrant, innovative, child-centered place; if it has a reputation for excellence in teaching; if students are performing to the best of their ability one can almost always point to the principal's leadership as the key to success (p.44).

Now into the fifth year of the educational reform movement, it is time to take a hard look at whether or not research is being put into practice in terms of the efforts being made to select the best and the brightest for the position of principal.

The premise of this study is that bias, either for or against certain kinds of candidates for the principalship, still exists today despite our enlightenment about what constitutes effective school leadership. By and large, the hiring agents are white male superintendents who, collectively, constitute the "old guard" and practice a brand of discrimination, whether intentional or not, long enshrined in tradition and comfort.

Beyond identifying whether or not hiring agents discriminate against certain kinds of candidates, this study will attempt to categorize ways in which discrimination occurs. Specifically, it will look at three kinds of bias that may be wrongfully practiced by hiring agents:

Cluster # 1) Gender of the candidate.

Cluster # 2) Experience versus knowledge or education of the candidate.

Cluster # 3) Miscellaneous variables in hiring practices (for example, personal bias of the superintendent for or against a particular candidate).

Methodology

Because of the sensitive nature of this topic it was felt that more honest responses could be obtained through the use of a survey which preserves the anonymity of the respondent. Thus, a survey instrument was designed to check the perceptions of practicing building level administrators regarding how principals are hired in today's educational climate. (See attached survey instrument). The questions in the survey were randomly dispersed from three clusters according to the kind of bias they examine. Cluster one looks at gender bias and contains questions 2, 4, and 8. Cluster two looks at experience versus knowledge or education bias and contains questions 3, 6, 7 and 9. The third cluster differs from clusters one and two which examine bias in a generic sense. Cluster three contains questions 1, 5, 10 and 11, and seeks to unveil individual experiences with discriminatory practices endured by respondents in their search for employment as a principal.

The sample population included all 39 elementary and secondary principals in Washington County, Maine. Twenty nine people responded, giving a 74% response rate. We turned to principals for this study because they are the integral link between school boards, superintendents and schools. In searching for employment as principals, these educators have experienced the nuances of the selection process and thus have first hand knowledge about the forces that either help or hinder one's ascendancy to the principalship.

Educational Importance

By examining and exposing the perceptions that exist regarding discriminatory hiring practices, perhaps traditional mind sets will be challenged and replaced. Ultimately, the goal for school boards and superintendents will be to rise above traditional impressions of who will personify a "good principal." For the sake of all students in our schools who stand to benefit the most from having an excellent principal at the helm, school boards and superintendents must actively seek to hire the best and the brightest principals in the profession.

(Survey Instrument)

PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPALS

Based on your observations of how principals are hired, please react to the following statements. Mark "A" if you agree with the statement, "D" if you disagree, and "N" if you have no opinion.

_____1. Superintendents who utilize an interviewing team comprised of teachers, school board members, and/or parents generally let the team decide who will be recommended to the board for the job rather than make the decision by themselves.

_____2. The "good-old-boy" network has more to do with who gets hired than any other single factor.

_____3. Having a Master's degree in educational administration with a solid background in education reform, leadership theory, effective schools, etc., is more important to hiring agents than having previous experience as a teaching principal, assistant principal or principal.

_____4. Since the federal government rarely challenges schools on their compliance with Affirmative Action guidelines, most superintendents ignore opportunities to hire women and minorities, even when their qualifications equal or exceed that of white male candidates.

_____5. An "in-house"candidate is less likely to be considered than candidates from outside the system.

_____6. Most superintendents and school boards today are consciously aware of the current theories and research on effective schools and effective school leadership.

_____7. Most school boards and superintendents are genuinely involved in the educational reform movement and want to hire administrators who are on the "cutting edge" of the latest reform theories and practices.

_____8. More women would get asked to interviews if the superintendent could review applications without knowing the gender of the applicants.

_____9. It's not who you know, but what you know that really counts.

_____10. Even though schools are required to advertise for position openings, most superintendents already have made a decision on who they want to hire before the interview and selection process begins.

_____ 11. Most school boards insist on being involved in the interviewing and selection process regarding the hiring of a new principal.

COMMENTS - Please feel free to use the back of this form to offer any other information about how principals are hired. Thank you for your candid responses. They will be kept in strictest confidence!

OPTIONAL INFORMATION

I am a principal at the _____elementary level _____secondary level.

I have been a principal for _____ years.

I am _____male, _____ female, _____ minority.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by first looking at the responses of all principals as a total group. Then responses of various sub groups were separated out as follows:

1. Elementary versus secondary principals. No apparent differences were found between these two groups.

2. Men versus women principals. Many differences were found here.

3. Number of years of experience as a principal. The two categories examined were those with less than 8 years experience and those with 9 or more years of experience. Again, many differences were found.

Discussion of Results

Cluster # 1 - Gender

One of the most striking differences in the perceptions of principals occurred in response to question # 8 which asked whether or not more women would get asked to interviews if the superintendent could review applications without knowing the gender of the applicant. Principals with more than 8 years experience strongly disagreed with this statement (91%). In contrast, only 39% of all principals with less than 8 years experience disagreed with the statement. In speculating about the significance of the large discrepancy between these two groups, several possibilities come to mind.

1. Possibly there is greater awareness of gender bias on the part of less experienced principals assuming many of them have been recently active in the job market.
2. Defensiveness on the part of principals with more than 8 years experience because 10 out of 11 principals in this category are men, and therefore may feel threatened by the question.

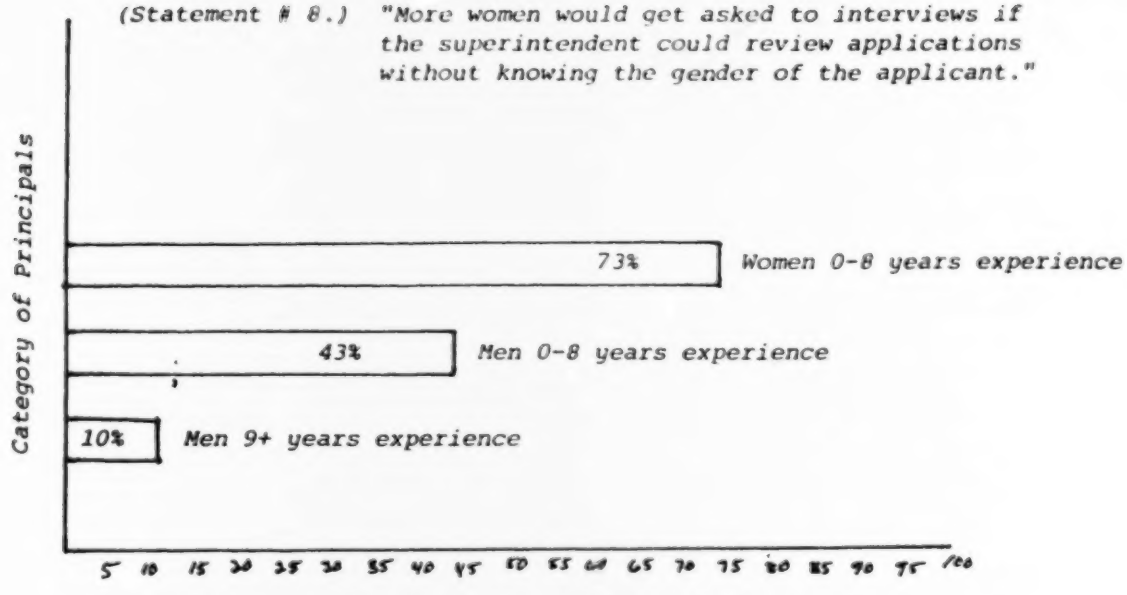
When breaking down the data even further, a look at the differences between men and women with less than 8 years experience reveals a gap which perhaps causes the figure of 39% discussed above to be a diluted figure. 73% of women feel there is gender discrimination as posed in question # 8, whereas, only 43% of the men do.

To reinforce the existence of gender bias found in question # 8, question # 2 resulted in a similar strength of response. This question asked whether or not the "good old boy" network has anything to do with who gets hired. Again, principals with more than 8 years experience strongly denied the existence of the "good old boy" network (73%), whereas women with less than 8 years experience (73%) strongly acknowledged the impact of the "good old boy" network as an important factor in getting hired.

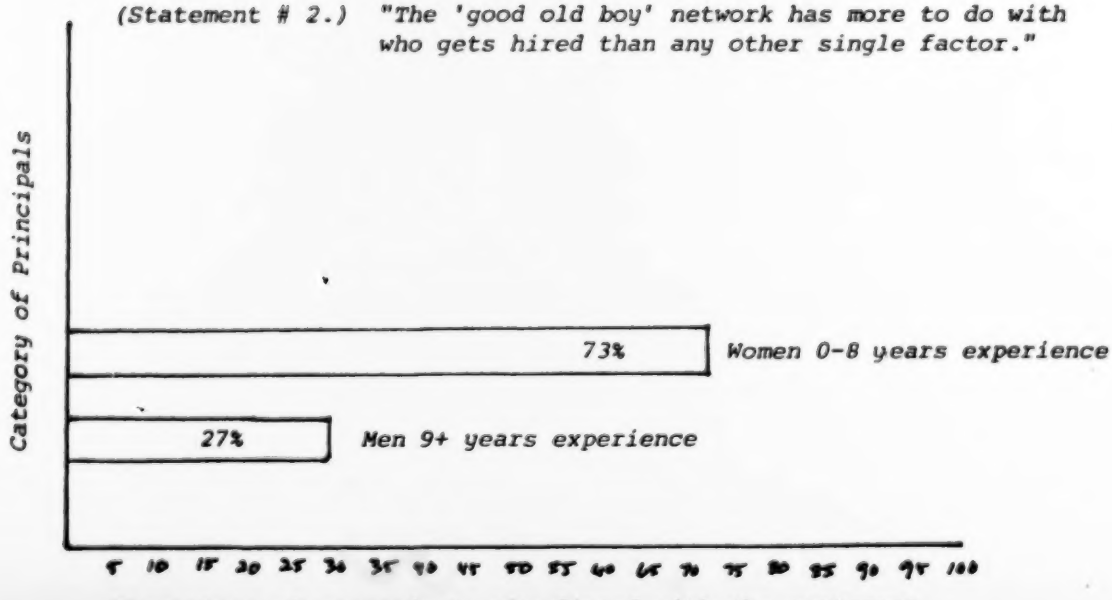
This information would seem to conflict with data from question # 4 which asked if superintendents overtly discriminate against women and minorities, even when their qualifications equal or exceed that of white male candidates. More than three fourths of all respondents (83%) disagreed with the statement. There were little differences found among other categories including women and men as separate groups. Since question # 4 was complicated by asking if the empty threat of governmental rebuff was involved, it's difficult to conclude whether or not respondents were being inconsistent with how they responded in questions 8 and 2 as described above.

Cluster # 1 - Gender

(Statement # 8.) "More women would get asked to interviews if the superintendent could review applications without knowing the gender of the applicant."


Category of Principals
73%
Women 0-8 years experience
43%
Men 0-8 years experience
10%
Men 9+ years experience
5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100
Percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement

(Statement # 2.) "The 'good old boy' network has more to do with who gets hired than any other single factor."


Category of Principals
73%
Women 0-8 years experience
27%
Men 9+ years experience
5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100
Percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement

Cluster # 2 - Experience versus knowledge or education

About half (55%) of the principals with more than 8 years experience believe school boards and superintendents are aware of the latest reform theories and practices. In contrast, 78% of all principals with less than 8 years experience believe school boards and superintendents are not up on the latest reform practices and theories. Findings between men and women were about equal on this issue, indicating this perception may be more a function of length of tenure as a principal than gender. Principals who have been on the job longer may feel threatened by less experienced, newly educated competition.

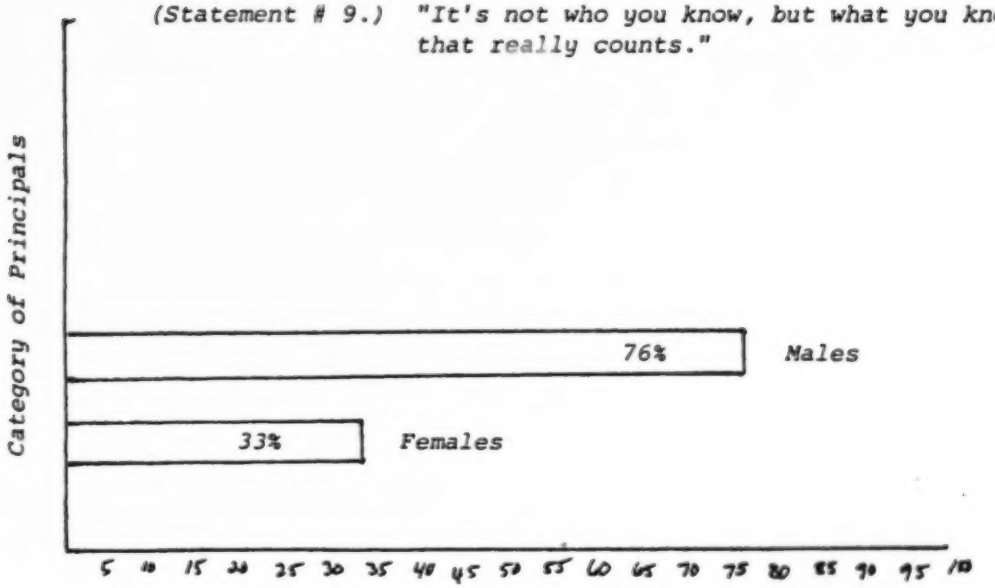
One very interesting statement which brought sharply different responses between men and women is the perception of whether or not being hired as a principal has more to do with who you know than what you know. Only 33% of the women agreed with the statement: "It's not who you know but what you know that really counts." This infers that women believe hiring agents are more apt to consider candidates who have been "recommended" by someone who is mutually known by both the candidate and the hiring agent. Whereas 76% of all the men agreed with the statement, the implication is that men believe hiring agents look objectively at all candidates on their merits and not on the persuasion of a candidate's mentor or someone else who might have influence with the superintendent or school board.

This information seems to correlate with data in cluster # 1 which asked about the existence of the "good old boy" network. Since men and women are on opposite sides of the fence on this issue, it reinforces the notion that gender bias does in fact exist. Additionally, it demonstrates there is not as great a premium on knowledge of the candidate as one would like to think.

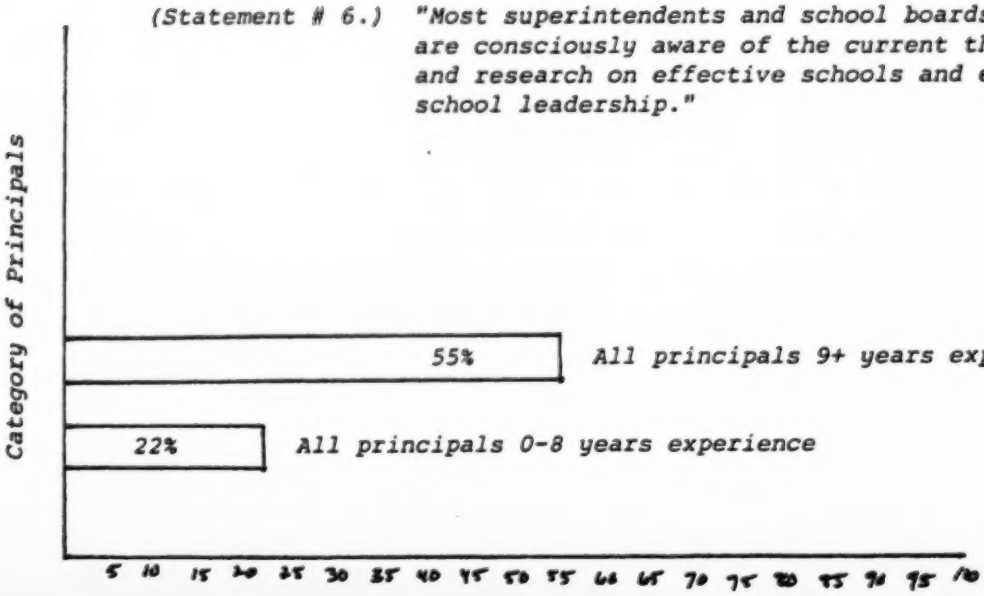
When looking at question # 6, only 34% of all principals believe that superintendents and school boards are consciously aware of current theories on effective schools and leadership. In keeping with this, 83% believe it's more important to have experience in administration than it is to have a master's degree in educational administration. Taken in combination, these two factors would lead us to conclude that a definite bias exists on the part of hiring agents in favor of candidates with experience over candidates with advanced degrees.

Cluster # 2 - Experience versus Knowledge or Education

(Statement # 9.) "It's not who you know, but what you know that really counts."


Category of Principals
76%
Males
33%
Females
5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100
Percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement

(Statement # 6.) "Most superintendents and school boards today are consciously aware of the current theories and research on effective schools and effective school leadership."


Category of Principals
55%
All principals 9+ years experience
22%
All principals 0-8 years experience
5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100
Percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement

Cluster # 3 - Miscellaneous variables in hiring practices

The questions in cluster # 3 seek to determine whether or not superintendents and school boards are utilizing contemporary hiring practices such as team interviewing and group decision making as opposed to more traditional exclusionary practices. There were few areas of disagreement among any of the categories analyzed (men v. women, more than 8 years experience v. less, etc.). Issues such as whether or not in-house candidates are more likely to be considered than someone from outside the system seemed to elicit an equal number of responses on either side of the arguement. Since perceptions were somewhat neutral on these questions, we can only conclude that about half of all hiring agents have adopted more contemporary hiring practices while about half have not.

Conclusions

The perceptions of the 29 principals who returned a completed survey indicate that superintendents and school boards are not as objective, fair and equitable as they should be in selecting and hiring principals. One major revelation from the survey is that school boards and superintendents are not aware of the current theories and research on effective schools and effective school leadership. It follows then, that research is not being put into practoce in terms of the efforts being made to select the best and the brightest for the position of principal.

For example, it is not surprising to see the extent to which discriminatory hiring practices still exist. The issue of gender bias clearly emerges as one area of great concern. Analyzing female approaches to administration that can be used by all administrators might help to isolate particular strategies and behaviors that promote effective schooling. A synthesis of research on women in educational administration provides the following proposition by Charol Shakeshaft (1986, p. 121).

Three major tenets of a woman's approach to leading a school:

1. Individuals are the most important link.
2. Teaching and learning is the major focus of women adminstrators.
3. Building community is an essential part of a woman administrator's style.

From speech patterns to decision-making styles, women exhibit a more democratic participatory style that encourages inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness in schools.

Another major concern emerging from the results of this survey is the apparent disregard for the level of education or knowledge of candidates on the part of hiring agents. It appears as though a much greater premium is still placed on whether or not the candidate had prior experience as an administrator. This is an issue of quantity as opposed to quality.

"The old adage, 'experience is the best teacher,' speaks to this point. The relation of 'experience' to ability is frequently oversimplified and often only partially understood. It's the quality, the nature of the experience that counts." (Blumberg and Greenfield, p. 259).

In the interviewing and selection of principals, both their formal and informal learning should be taken into consideration. Certification, advanced graduate work, an excellent teaching reputation, and a personable and likable manner are not guarantee of effectiveness as a principal. (Blumberg and Greenfield, p. 260).

While this study may present an inflammatory indictment on school boards and superintendents, the picture may not be as dismal for those who aspire to the principalship in the future. It is encouraging to note things may be changing. For example, Maine's new administrator certification law will require all principals and superintendents to works towards a master's degree. This will help improve the knowledge base of those in the power positions.

Implications for the Future

One opportunity for change lies in the fact that the state of Maine is undergoing a major turnover in superintendencies at the present time. Seven out of the eight school districts in Washington County will have hired a new

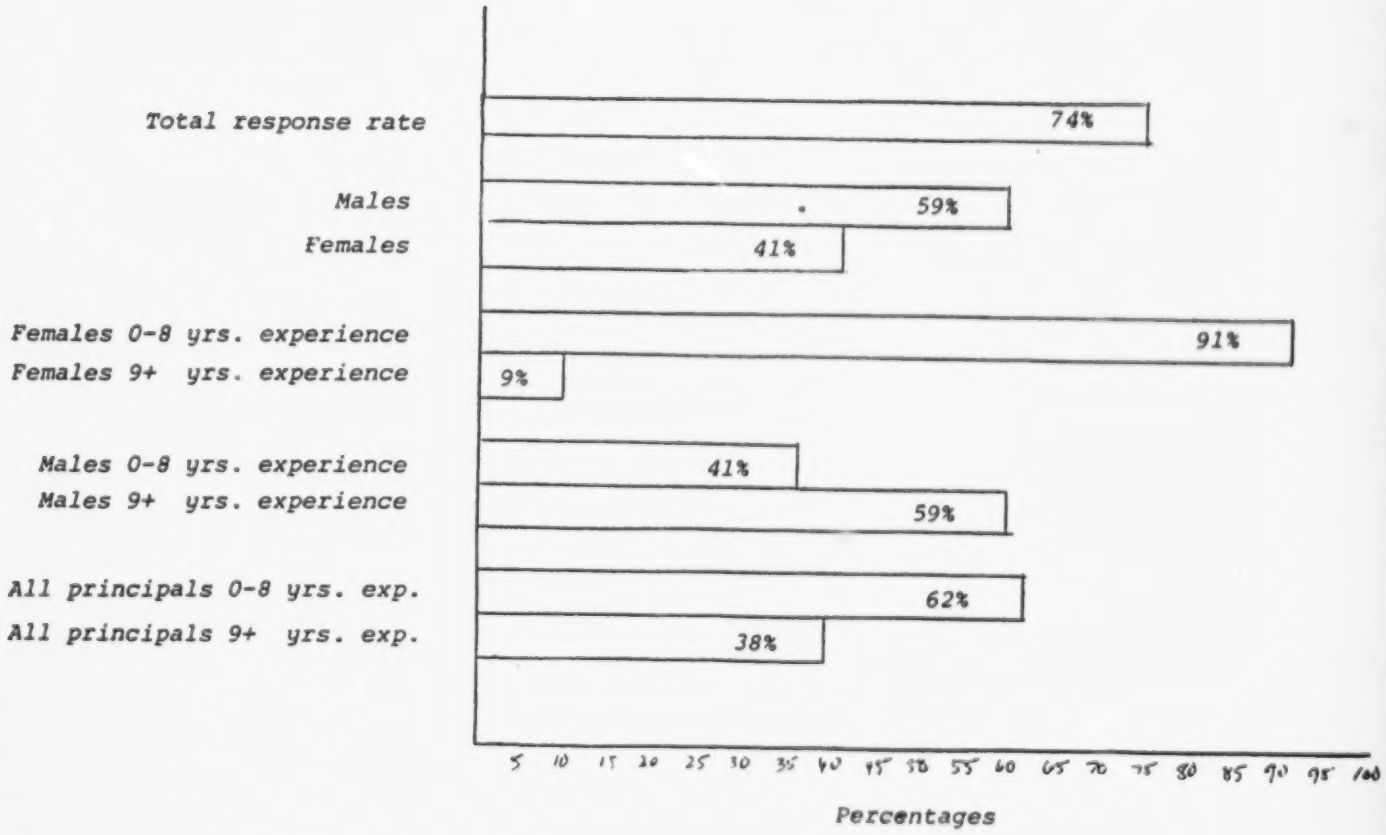
superintendent in the last year or will be hiring one in the coming year. Will these communities or school districts take advantage of this opportunity to improve the quality of leadership in their schools? It would be interesting to survey the perceptions of principals three to five years from now to see if the new hiring agents will have had a positive impact on the reform efforts in the communities they serve.

In the interim, future research might heighten the awareness of superintendents and school boards by exploring their perceptions on various reform issues. "Because change is a process, not an event" (Fullan, 1982), it is very important that the people in the highest positions of power make an ongoing commitment to search for ways to improve the quality of education in our schools.

School principals can make a real difference in the lives of children and teachers, and the role of principal offers many opportunities for those who are hired to assume the responsibilities of leadership in education. The principalship desperately needs men and women having a vision that carries them beyond merely maintaining things as they are; it needs men and women with the confidence and strength to build a school environment that releases rather than restrains the educational potential of children, teachers, and other members of the school community. School boards and superintendents who see this potential, and who act upon it, can indeed make a much needed contribution to improving our schools.

Appendix

Characteristics of the Respondents in the Sample Population



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